

***ACTING LIKE A PIANIST:  
MUSIC FOR THE THEATRICAL PIANIST***

BY

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ACTING LIKE A PIANIST: MUSIC FOR THE THEATRICAL PIANIST

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## ABSTRACT

In the twentieth-century, there has been an explosion in explicitly theatrical pieces for solo piano. In most of these works, the pianist's ability to vocalize while at the same time playing the instrument has been the principle focus of composers. Additionally, the percussive attributes of the piano, including aspects of the prepared piano, have been instrumental in the development of this new genre. *Acting Like a Pianist* describes this development through its four primary uses which are:

1. Musical Effect / Impressions: The theatrical elements serve as a textural addition to the musical writing, providing greater programmatic description.
2. Performance Art: Theater takes a larger role in the composition than the actual written music.
3. Storytelling / Poetic Settings: Using music to accompany a retelling of pre-existing prose, often involving elements of characterization and acting.
4. Political / Social Commentary: Combining elements of traditional composition with recitation of texts and other theatrical elements to make political or social statements. This incorporates many of the qualities of storytelling, while giving a stricter framework for comprehension based on the subject matter.

This paper will discuss the major composers and works which have laid the foundations for the genre as well as the important role of twenty-first-century pianists in promoting these works. Among the composers are Henry Cowell, George Crumb, Karlheinz Stockhausen, John Cage, Meredith Monk, Jerome Kitzke, Christian Wolff, and Frederic Rzewski.

The concept of theater in classical music is generally reserved for the realms of opera, oratorio, musical theater, and other vocal genres. The obvious reason for this is the intrinsic ability of the voice to tell stories, and the physical freedom a singer enjoys compared with other instrumentalists. In the twentieth-century, however, there has been an explosion in explicitly theatrical pieces for solo piano. In most of these works, the pianist's ability to vocalize while at the same time playing the instrument has been the principle focus of composers. Additionally, the percussive attributes of the piano, including aspects of the prepared piano, have been instrumental in the development of this new genre.

Theater in piano music is used most often for one or all of the following reasons:

1. Musical Effect / Impressions: The theatrical elements serve as a textural addition to the musical writing, providing greater programmatic description.
2. Performance Art: Theater takes a larger role in the composition than the actual written music.
3. Storytelling / Poetic Settings: Using music to accompany a retelling of pre-existing prose, often involving elements of characterization and acting.
4. Political / Social Commentary: Combining elements of traditional composition with recitation of texts and other theatrical elements to make political or social statements. This incorporates many of the qualities of storytelling, while giving a stricter framework for comprehension based on the subject matter.

Composers such as Henry Cowell, John Cage, and Frederic Rzewski are major contributors to this style, while a number of other composers have produced significant theater pieces, making the genre of theatrical piano music a new frontier for both composers and performers alike. This paper will discuss the major

composers and works which have laid the foundations for the genre as well as the important role of twenty-first-century pianists in promoting these works.

## **DEVELOPMENT OF THEATRICAL PIANISM**

While theatricality as an essential part of composition for solo piano is a development of the twentieth-century, the piano has long held a place as the home of the most “theatrical” performers on stage. The tradition of pianistic theatricality can be traced back to the most influential performer of the nineteenth century, Franz Liszt. Liszt created what we consider the solo recital of today. His performances were noted as much for his over-the-top gestures and wild hair as for his diabolical virtuosity and diverse repertoire. While making him the darling of concertgoers, these gestures, from gazing into the heavens with eyes closed to exaggerated hand and arm movements, were not a “necessary” part of performance. However, as Liszt’s fame grew, other instrumentalists, including violinist Niccolò Paganini, made this ego-driven theatricality common practice. It remains an important element in varying degrees to every concert artist’s on-stage persona. From Lang Lang to Alfred Brendel, to Vladimir Horowitz, this aspect “stage presence” is understood to be a central part to their marketability and artistic image.

## **THEATRICAL IMPRESSIONISM |**

**HENRY COWELL, GEORGE CRUMB, KARLHEINZ STOCKHAUSEN**

In the late nineteenth century, a new trend developed in the French artistic community. Claude Monet's painting *Impression, soleil levant* (Impression, sunrise) began what is now known as the "impressionist" style. The impressionists "exploited the suffusing effects of light, color, and atmospheric conditions to undermine sharply drawn contours. The subtle gradations produced by haze and smoke were especially favored, giving rise to softly focused, somewhat "blurred" images intended to convey the general "impression" of a scene rather than its precise visual equivalent."<sup>1</sup> The musical equivalent of this style developed in the early twentieth century, most notably in the music of Maurice Ravel and Claude Debussy. They made use of new harmonic and melodic devices to create musical "impressions" of water, wind, snow, and other subjects. Impressionism was a way to increase the programmatic effect of music. Later in the century, composers would discover that by adding theatrical elements, especially the voice, audiences would grasp the programmatic impressions of their music at an even greater level. It is this use of theater that defines theatrical impressionism.

### **HENRY COWELL**

The development of theatrical music as a distinct genre and compositional element can be traced to the early twentieth century and the music of Henry Cowell

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<sup>1</sup> Don Randel, ed., *The New Harvard Dictionary of Music*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press (1986), 391.

(1897-1965). Cowell is most remembered for his expansion of the harmonic realm through the use of tone clusters. He was also the first composer to explore the sonic capabilities of the inside of the piano. In 1913, Cowell composed *The Aeolian Harp* requiring the pianist to strum the strings of the piano while silently depressing a series of triads. The result was a harp-like ringing of the triad and led to Cowell's further exploration of these extended techniques.

In 1925, Cowell composed what I consider the first intrinsically theatrical work for solo piano, *The Banshee*. In this piece, Cowell exclusively utilizes the inside of a grand piano, creating an utterly unique and new aural experience. In Irish legend, the Banshee is a female spirit seen as a messenger of death. She is said to wail about the home when someone is about to die. Cowell's *Banshee* recreates this tale without words. The pianist, standing in the crook of the piano, strums, plucks, and slides over the strings mimicking the Banshee's cries. It is a physical, visual, and audible ballet in which the pianist serves as a puppeteer. This physical theatricality and exploration of sound influenced every composer of theatrical music in the later twentieth century. *The Banshee* remains a landmark of contemporary piano music and its use of theatrical elements in impressionistic ways make it the original "theater piece" for solo piano.

## **GEORGE CRUMB**

When George Crumb (b. 1929) emerged on the scene in the late 1960s, the idea of the "prepared piano" was old news. John Cage had expanded on Cowell's early experiments and composed dozens of work requiring screws, paper, rubber

strips and other implements to be placed on and between the piano strings to create a seemingly endless possibility of sounds. These developments were crucial for the creation of nearly all of Crumb's mature music, most of which involve theatrical elements.

Crumb uses theater as a tool to enhance his already descriptive musical imagery. Vocalization, physical gestures, masks, and lighting are all tools by which Crumb creates his musical dramas. One of the most significant of these works is 1971's *Vox Balanae (The Voice of the Whale)* for flute, cello, and piano. This work asks for the three performers to don masks and play on a stage washed in blue light. These theatrical elements of lighting and costume were unique to Crumb at the time. Combined with the contemporary compositional elements in Crumb's score, *Vox Balanae* creates a musical play recreating the underwater world of the humpback whale.

In his solo piano pieces, theater plays an equally important role without the use of masks or lights. Vocal effects, physical gestures, and prepared piano techniques are used to great success in books 1 and 2 of the *Makrokosmos*. Crumb's *Makrokosmos* were composed as an homage to his heroes from the early twentieth century, Claude Debussy and Béla Bartók. Each volume contains 12 pieces relating to the 12 signs of the zodiac. Each piece is given a descriptive title and every fourth piece is composed using symbolic notation (ex. 1).<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> From Book 1:

mvmt. 4: *Crucifixus* (in the shape of the cross)  
mvmt. 8: *The Magic Circle of Infinity* (in a circle)  
mvmt. 12: *The Spiral Galaxy* (in a spiral)



**Ex. 1: *Makrokosmos II*, 8. “A Prophecy of Nostradamus.” This movement is in the shape of an “all-seeing” eye.**

8. A Prophecy of Nostradamus  
[SYMBOL]

The musical score is presented in a circular, eye-like format. At the top, it is labeled '8. A Prophecy of Nostradamus [SYMBOL]'. Below this, the score is divided into several sections. The central section is titled 'Tema enigmatico' and contains musical notation with various markings such as 'fz', 'sfz', and 'p'. The score is surrounded by a circular border containing the names of the instruments: 'Violin I', 'Violin II', 'Viola', 'Cello', 'Double Bass', 'Flute', 'Oboe', 'Clarinet', 'Bassoon', 'Trumpet', 'Trombone', 'Tuba', 'Percussion', 'Harp', 'Piano', and 'Celesta'. The score is written in a circular fashion, with the staves curving around the central section. The overall layout is symmetrical and circular, reflecting the 'all-seeing eye' concept mentioned in the text.

The use of vocalization is one of Crumb’s most effective theatrical techniques, and one that influenced a number of composers later in the twentieth century. Crumb uses chanting, whistling, and vocal exclamations as distinct musical gestures, adding to the rich colors and textures already present in his music. Two of the most striking movements in the *Makrokosmos*, “Crucifixus” and “Agnus Dei” feature dynamic vocal elements. In “Crucifixus” (ex. 2), Crumb creates a mystical atmosphere through

From Book 2:

- mvmt. 4: *Twin Suns* (two circles)
- mvmt. 8: *A Prophecy of Nostradamus* (an eye) – see example
- mvmt. 12: *Agnus Dei* (in the shape of a peace sign)

a generally soft, understated piano part that is interrupted by a shout in Latin of the word “*Christe!*”. This vocal effect heightens the musical experience and brings a more literal understanding of the programmatic implications of the piece. This is Crumb’s primary reason for the use of vocal effects: intensification and clarification of the musical drama.

Likewise, in the final movement of book 2, “*Agnus Dei*” (ex. 3), Crumb requires the pianist to sing and chant the words of the *Agnus Dei*,<sup>3</sup> while following the symbolic “prayer-wheel” in the shape of a peace sign on which the music is notated. The result is a representation of peace that transcends the possibilities of Crumb’s music alone. The voice and his visual representation on the score heighten the understanding of his musical intentions. Crumb uses theater as a more complete kind of impressionism than composers of previous generations. His limited use of vocalization serves a subtle role enhancing his descriptive musical language.

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<sup>3</sup> *Agnus Dei, qui tollis peccata mundi, miserere nobis. Dona nobis pacem. Dona nobis pacem. Dona nobis pacem. Dona nobis pacem. Dona nobis pacem.* (Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world, have mercy on us. Grant us peace. Grant us peace. Grant us peace. Grant us peace.)

**Ex. 2: *Makrokosmos I*, 4. “Crucifixus.” The pianist shouts “*Christe*” (circled in example below).**

[illegible]

**Ex. 3: *Makrokosmos II*, 12. “Agnus Dei.” The pianist chants and sings the Agnus Dei<sup>4</sup> (the text is circle below).**

19

12. Agnus Dei [SYMBOL]

Capricorn

"Prayer-wheel": Very slow ( $\text{♩} = 76$ ); like vision; as if suspended in endless time

Cyclic sopra ( $\text{♩} = 40$ )

Very slow, like chanting ( $\text{♩} = 40$ )

Very slow, tender, ch on key (singer)

[R.W.V.]

Media, Pennsylvania 1973

**KARLHEINZ STOCKHAUSEN**

In the last quarter of the twentieth century, the technique of using theater as a tool to heighten programmatic description was used to an even greater degree by German experimentalist composer Karlheinz Stockhausen (1928-2007). He is one of the most polarizing voices in contemporary music history, and his music has crossed the thresholds of nearly every contemporary musical style. Stockhausen has been a

<sup>4</sup> Agnus Dei. Qui tollis peccata mundi. Mi se re re. Nobis. Donna nobis pacem.

leading serialist, innovator with electronics, proponent of aleatoric functions, and a creator of new formal devices, and is among the least understood composers of the last fifty years. His output in the realm of theatrical music is large enough to warrant an entire volume. His innovations in musical composition are enough to warrant an entire series. In the context of this document, it is his penultimate piano piece, *Klavierstücke XIV*, which merits inclusion.

Beginning in 1977, Stockhausen began composing an opera epic called *Licht* (Light). *Licht* is a cycle of seven operas, one for each day of the week, utilizing all of the compositional tools from his earlier output, and occupying all of his creative energy for 26 years. *Licht* is best understood as a series of passion plays focusing on the characters Eva, Michael (the angel), and Lucifer. Proportion, numerology, mythology, and spirituality guide the work's creation and performance. Within each of the seven operas, Stockhausen uses the instrumentalists as actors, intoning nonsense texts within his libretto, and also personifies elements of the individual instruments. The scenes for each opera are often excerpted as solo concert works, as in scene 2 from *Samsag aus LICHT* (Saturday from LICHT), "Kathinka's Chant as Lucifer's Requiem," in which the flutist appears on stage as a cat woman.

*Klavierstücke XIV* is from Act II of *Montag aus LICHT* (Monday from LIGHT), subtitled "Eve's Second Birth-giving." In the overall production of *Licht*, the piano tends to serve as an object of sex and of man's passions. In *Licht*, the pianist, dressed as a budgerigar (a parrot), performs *Klavierstücke XIV* as the act of inseminating a statue of Eva. The piece is comic in many ways, and the pianist makes

a number of vocalizations including shouting the word “sex,” making kissing sounds, phonetic pronunciations, and breath sounds (ex. 4).

**Ex. 4:** *Klavierstücke XIV*, mm. 7 (pianist vocalizes “eins, zwie, drei, vier, fünf, sex!”).

Handwritten musical score for *Klavierstücke XIV*, mm. 7. The score is written on five staves. The top staff has a treble clef and a key signature of one flat (B-flat). It contains a melodic line with a triplet of eighth notes and a 'poco rubato' marking. The second staff has a treble clef and a key signature of one flat, with a 'p' dynamic marking. The third staff has a bass clef and a key signature of one flat, with a 'ppp' dynamic marking and a bracketed section labeled 'l. H. Ellbogen loco'. The fourth staff has a bass clef and a key signature of one flat, with a 'mf' dynamic marking and a bracketed section labeled 'Fingerflächen beider Hände schnell unreg. über schwarze Tasten ratschen'. The fifth staff has a bass clef and a key signature of one flat, with a 'f' dynamic marking and a bracketed section labeled 'Zahlen flüsternd rufen (etwas stimmhaft)'. Below the staves, the words 'eins zwie drei vier fünf sex!' are written. At the bottom, there is a line of text: 'unregelm. aufs linke Ped. treten (klapperndes Geräusch)'.

*Klavierstücke XIV* in the context of the opera is a provocative statement of sexuality and of the “mystery of existence itself, a mystery that to the composer’s way of thinking ultimately has nothing to do with the animal act of procreation.”<sup>5</sup> As a concert work, it is an expressive and humorous work blending theater and pianism to create an altogether unique musical concept. Like Crumb and Cowell, the theater

<sup>5</sup> Robin Maconie, *Other Planets: The Music of Karlheinz Stockhausen*, The Scarecrow Press: Lanham, MD (2005), 470.

of *Klavierstücke XIV*, when performed as a solo work, is not storytelling in the traditional sense. Instead, the theatrical elements are used to heighten the reality of Stockhausen's musical ideas. From costuming to vocalization, Stockhausen created his own personal version of musical theater, or more accurately, music *as* theater.<sup>6</sup>

## PERFORMANCE ART | JOHN CAGE

In the 1950s, a new trend began in the artistic circles of New York. Musicians, dancers, and visual artists began redefining the parameters of artistic expression. Art escaped gallery walls and musical scores and became a living experience, impermanent and unique to each performance environment. Much of this performance art was conceived of as social commentary and frequently resulted in the embarrassment, shock, and sometimes outrage of the general artistic community. In many ways, performance art gave every person the individual ability to become an artist. The earliest performance art exhibitions were called “happenings” and featured some of the most innovative figures in the avant-garde scene. For musicians, this meant a license to reinvent notation, performance practice, and the concert experience itself. In contrast to the theatrical impressionism of Crumb and Stockhausen, theater for these experimentalists was a primary vehicle for expression. In every possible way, they blurred the lines of music, dance, art literature, and everyday life. No one has been more influential in this style than John Cage.

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<sup>6</sup> Maconie, 403-544.

## JOHN CAGE

Inventor, artist, revolutionary, John Cage (1912-1992) remains perhaps the most influential composer of the past sixty years. His work has moved, inspired, angered, and dumbfounded listeners of all generations. Cage has composed in an enormous diversity of styles from the more traditional—including twelve tone, minimalism, and serialism, to the radical—performance art pieces, aleatoric works, and the first musical “happenings”. The inventor of the prepared piano, Cage was fascinated by the possibilities of sound.

Equally important, however, is Cage’s search for the true essence of music and his discovery of the compositional role of the performer. This role resulted in some of the most significant performances of the twentieth century. Not only did Cage erase the traditional meaning of “music,” but he also made the performances of his music a theatrical event unlike any to ever grace a stage. For his purposes, Cage defined theater this way:

I try to make definitions that won’t exclude. I would simply say that theatre is something which engages both the eye and the ear. The two public senses are seeing and hearing; the senses of taste, touch, and odor are more proper to intimate, non-public situations. The reason I want to make my definition that simple is so one could view everyday life itself as theatre.<sup>7</sup>

Cage, using chance operations and notations, composed dozens of works in this style, many featuring the leading avant-garde pianist of the day David Tudor. Two of the most important of Cage’s theater pieces are his first, *Water Music*, and his most

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<sup>7</sup> William Fetterman, *John Cage’s Theatre Pieces: Notations and Performances*, Amsterdam: Harwood Academic Publishers (1996), 21.



infamous, 4'33". Both of these works were premiered by David Tudor and serve as landmarks of the performance art generation.

Composed in 1952, *Water Music* was John Cage's first complete theater piece. Written for his dear friend, pianist David Tudor, *Water Music* employs the piano as well as a radio, three whistles, a deck of cards, pitchers of water, a wooden stick, four piano preparations, and a stopwatch. As is common with Cage's music, the performer can freely change the title of the piece to either the date or place of performance.<sup>8</sup> *Water Music* requires a pianist with a particular theatrical ability and freedom from inhibition. This trait is common amongst the pianists who make theatrical music a staple of their repertoire. David Tudor was *the* pianist during the 1950s and '60s for this style. His approach to Cage's theater pieces was stoic, straight-faced, and supremely serious. Discussing his multiple performances of *Water Music*, Tudor recalls:

It was very enjoyable, and not so easy to do – you know, the sounds are very special – like the sound of the duck whistle in a bowl of water [from 0.30 through 0.525 in the score], and the duck is supposed to die, so you had a whistle with a wide mouth. It's a very special sound.

I remember that the sounds are very important, and how difficult the radio was to play because of the timing. And each radio is different and where to tune it.

One of the nicest things that happened was when I was playing it in London in 1954, and there is an occurrence where you turn on the radio for three seconds and then turn it off [at 3.505 in the score], and I turned it on – (laughs) – “These sounds are

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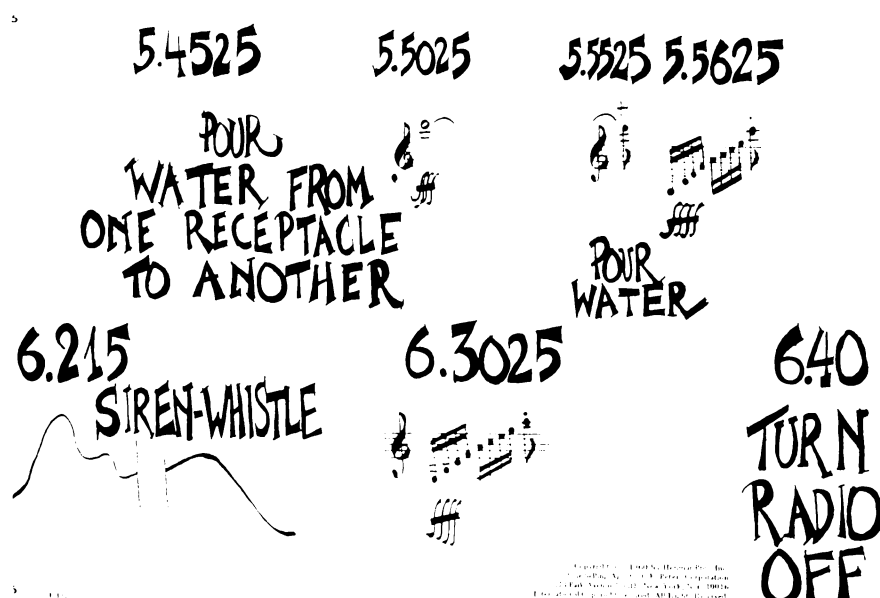
<sup>8</sup> The first performance was programmed as 66 W. 12. This was the street address of the New School for Social Research in New York City where David Tudor gave the premiere.

coming to you through the courtesy of the British Broadcasting Corporation” (laughs).<sup>9</sup>

I wouldn’t hesitate to smile, but I was a very dedicated performer. I made a point of making it very straight, because that’s what it is.<sup>10</sup>

*Water Music* is composed on eleven pages that are mounted on poster board. The piece last just over six-and-a-half minutes and is notated in blocks of time. Each event occurs at a specified time and lasts for a pre-determined duration. The handwritten score is a beautiful example of Cage’s calligraphy and is usually reproduced for the audience during performance (ex. 5).

**Ex. 5: *Water Music*, final page**



In addition to the time indications written in the score, events are laid out in a spatial relationship that equals the passing of time. In *Water Music*, every 30

<sup>9</sup> The radio has provided a number of interesting moments in performances of *Water Music*. In a performance of Margaret Len Tan in 1988, the radio broadcaster was talking about John Cage.

<sup>10</sup> Fetterman, 25.

horizontal inches equals 40 seconds of performance time. On stage, the pianist moves about between stations where each of the notated events occurs. *Water Music* represents a landmark in the development of the theatrical genre. A few months after the composition of *Water Music*, Cage would write what has become his most famous, or infamous, piece: 4'33".

In the history of music, few pieces have reached the cult-like status of 4'33". Sometimes called the *Silent Sonata for Piano*, it is the most flagrant attack on the reality and definition of music. Inspired by the all-white paintings of Robert Rauschenberg, 4'33" was composed in 1952 using chance operations to determine the duration of its three silent movements – 30", 2'23", and 1'40", which, added together, make 4'33".<sup>11</sup>

Few pieces have garnered a stronger reaction, either positive or negative, from audiences, critics, and musicians worldwide. William Fetterman recounts a number of critiques of 4'33":

The most articulate negative interpretation of 4'33" s expressed by David Tame, who sarcastically writes that Cage "no doubt took considerable pains to compose" this "masterpiece," and that it should "be viewed as nothing but a joke; cheap, unnecessary, and perhaps also, ego-centric." Richard Taruskin echoes Tame's view, stating that 4'33" is the "ultimate aesthetic aggrandizement, an act of transcendent empyrialism.... Caroline Jones...attempts to make the case that 4'33" is an example of "closet-case" homosexual art sensibility in which "silence" becomes both a "shield and protest" to unacceptable political aesthetic, and sexual practice during the "cold war."<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Richard K. Winslow, "John Cage," in *Music of the Twentieth-Century Avant-Garde: A Biocritical Sourcebook*, Larry Sitsky, ed., Greenwood Press: Westport, CT (2002), 95.

<sup>12</sup> Fetterman, 69.

Whatever an individual's view of 4'33", no one can argue against its revolutionary status. Cage believed strongly that noise was music that, in his opinion, 4'33" is not a silent piece at all. The music is the ambient sounds that occur in space – the rustling of papers, the sounds of air conditioners, the squeaking of chairs.

Cage conceived of 4'33" as a three-movement work with the sum total of the movements (30", 2'23", 1'40") equaling 4'33". The original score is a crucial element to its realization and understanding. Now lost, David Tudor has made several copies of the original. For a 1982 performance, Tudor "used standard-sized blank typing paper, and carefully added the staves and bar lines in pencil, notating on both sides of the sheet. The first movement was on the first two pages, the second movement on pages 3 through 9, a blank page 10, and the last movement on pages 11 through 14."<sup>13</sup>

The second score, published in 1993 by C.F. Peters, uses proportional notation. This version still incorporated the page turning of the original, with the first movement (30") on one page, the second (2'23") taking three pages, and the third (1'40") on two pages. A third and fourth version eliminates the multiple pages and linear notation of the first two, opting instead for linguistic notation. In these, each movement is given a Roman numeral with the word "tacet" alongside. The entire score is one page. David Tudor describes the importance of the score to performance, saying, "It's important that you read the score as you're performing it, so there are

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<sup>13</sup> Fetterman, 7.

these pages you use. So you wait, and then turn the page. I know it sounds very straight, but in the end it makes a difference.”<sup>14</sup>

In concert, pianists are free to perform a number of activities to heighten the performance experience. Some open and close the keyboard lid to signal the beginning and end of the movements, others turn the pages of the silent score, and some depress keys silently. Whatever the performer’s interpretive decisions, 4’33” is a piece that always leaves an impression. Love it or hate it, it is a singular work that defined the musical avant-garde and remains a heated topic of discussion among pianists, music historians, and anyone who “hears” it.

## **STORYTELLING AND POETIC SETTINGS |**

**MEREDITH MONK, JEROME KITZKE, MARTIN BRESNICK**

One of the main roles of the theater is to tell stories. This is the primary function of opera, art song, and lieder. In instrumental music, programmatic music is designed to do the same thing without words. In the twentieth century, some composers began adding strict narrator parts to accompany their instrumental program music, the best examples of this being Prokofiev’s *Peter and the Wolf* and Copland’s *Lincoln Portrait*. There are also numerous examples of works for solo instruments, namely piano, with a text to be recited by a narrator.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Fetterman, 75.

<sup>15</sup> Although it is not a part of the contemporary theatrical tradition, it is important to at least mention the use of narration and theatrical elements in the Civil War songs of performers like Blind Tom and others. These pieces would require the pianist to recount tales of battle, often making the sounds of canons, guns, and marching drums. These works were performed both as solo pieces, and as works with narrator, and serve as an important part of American music history.

A few composers have taken the bold step of writing virtuoso music for solo piano while also asking the pianist to vocalize a text through recitation, singing, and other vocal acrobatics. These pieces are the showstoppers of the theatrical genre. They require the same freedom from inhibition as the most extreme pieces of performance art and the same pianistic virtuosity as the most complex piano scores. In addition, the pianist who tackles these works must be able to give insightful interpretations of text, sing, whistle, improvise, and perform any number of physical gestures, all while playing the piano. The pieces that fall in this category are generally based on poetry or mythology, and usually contain elements of both comedy and drama. A number of works, particularly those of American composer Frederic Rzewski, are focused on political or social subjects. These works will be dealt with separately. Two other composers who have had great success in this style include Meredith Monk and Jerome Kitzke. Their music sits on the leading edge, pushing the boundaries of musical and theatrical possibilities, and is written in an absolutely individual style.

### **MEREDITH MONK**

Born in 1942, Meredith Monk is an artist who defies categorization. A dancer, choreographer, composer, pianist, singer, and actor, she has created a compositional language which harnesses her many talents. She is most known for her vocal innovations, particularly the creation of extended vocal techniques. While most of her music is in the form of opera and vocal ensemble pieces, she has a small but not insignificant catalogue of works for solo piano. Of these, several invoke the theatrical

qualities of her operas and require the pianist to produce many complicated vocal techniques.

Monk's music for theatrical piano requires a disclaimer. In many cases, these pieces are performed as vocal solos with piano accompaniments. However, with the ever-increasing number of gifted pianists interested and capable at performing theatrical works, including Monk herself, her music is now frequently being done solely by the pianist.

Despite her objections, Monk is usually described as a minimalist composer in the style of Steve Reich and Phillip Glass. While repetitive figures are central to her compositional style, she uses neither the rhythmic complexities of Reich or the endless, Zen-like repetition of Glass. Rather, her music focuses on a simple melodic approach so that the voice might be understood. Due to the extreme complexity of her vocal writing, Monk's vocal/piano works are not published. She has developed many of her own notations to indicate her desired vocal effects. In order for pianists to perform these works, they must work directly with her, becoming, in essence, a member of her band of performers. Most of these pieces, including *Gotham Lullaby*, *The Tale*, and *Gamemaster's Song*, are short pieces taken out of the context of her larger works (either operas or multi-piece performance cycles). In each case, however, the theatrical intention is the same – to tell stories by blending vocal and pianistic elements.

One of her most loved pieces is *The Tale* from her revolutionary opera *Education of the Girlchild* (1972). *Girlchild* is a kind of ritual opera about the journey

of life, death, and the many states of being along the way. “From the child’s first experiences—in which events register as pure sensation and indelible image—to the terrifying but inevitable moment of recognizing personal annihilation as the sole content of the future.”<sup>16</sup> *The Tale* is the story of the last survivor. In its musical setting, it is at first a comic piece, filled with humor and life. At the same time, it is an extremely poignant account of life. The piano part is a repetitive drone on top of which Monk’s distinct vocal styles are laid. Alternating between nonsense sounds, syllables, and text, the performer creates a vivid picture that is funny, moving, and absolutely charming. Both Monk and pianist Anthony de Mare have recorded and frequently perform *The Tale* as a solo piece.

#### **JEROME KITZKE**

While Meredith Monk’s theatrical piano music unquestionably asks more of the voice than of the fingers, a number composers have sought to make each an equal part in both the musical and dramatic aspects of performance. One of the most individual is New York-based composer Jerome Kitzke. Kitzke (b. 1955) is well known in new music circles as a maverick, drawing inspiration from Native American culture, the American West, and Beat Generation poetry. His ensemble, Mad Coyote, is highly regarded for their improvisational and theatrical abilities as well as their virtuosity.

Kitzke uses both vocalization and physical theater in his piano compositions as a partner to his idiomatic musical style. He has published only two works for piano

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<sup>16</sup> Deborah Jowett, ed., *Meredith Monk*, Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press (1997), 54.



solo, *Sunflower Sutra*, a large-scale work for amplified speaking/singing pianist, and *The Animist Child*, a short work for speaking pianist playing toy piano. Kitzke views his use of theatrical techniques as an elaboration of the techniques of George Crumb. His goal is to make theater and vocalization a vital and dynamic aspect of his compositions. The theatrical requirements are extreme and include body percussion, singing, speaking with accents, sound effects, and a wide array of notated physical gestures.

*Sunflower Sutra* is one of the most demanding works in the theatrical genre. Based on Allen Ginsburg's poem of the same title, *Sunflower Sutra* is a 20-minute piece written for the innovative pianist Anthony de Mare. Kitzke composed *Sunflower Sutra* in 1999 as a memorial to his sister, Mary, who was dying of cancer. In addition to a complete narration of the entire poem, Kitzke added his own text at the beginning and end of the piece as specific references to Mary. Ginsburg's poem was written in twenty minutes and recounts an actual experience that he shared with Jack Kerouac. Together, they sat alongside a dirty canal surrounded by an array of junk, trash, and old locomotives. Amongst the dirt and grime, there was one dirty sunflower growing. The poem is about the beauty of the sunflower despite its desperate surroundings. In relation to his sister and to mankind, it tells us that no matter what is on the outside, there is always a beautiful sunflower on the inside. Kitzke uses the image of a locomotive coming and going as the symbol for his sister (the complete text of *Sunflower Sutra* can be found in Appendix 1).

*Sunflower Sutra* is told as a conversation between two old bums (Ginsberg and Kerouac) sitting on a log. Interpretively, the pianist must decide how to portray the two characters. What kind, if any, accent does one use when reciting the text? How does one's facial expression convey the characters? These and other questions must be dealt with by the performer.

Throughout *Sunflower Sutra*, the vocal/theatrical elements occur in conjunction with the pianistic and percussive actions of the pianist. This constant interplay is one of the most difficult and original aspects of Kitzke's work (for a complete list of *Sunflower Sutra's* theatrical elements and their pianistic accompaniments, please see Appendix B).

Each of the piece's seven sections<sup>17</sup> utilizes a different combination of elements. The four sections titled "Mad American Locomotive of the Heart" use a more improvisatory vocal part, featuring a number of sound effects and notated physical gestures. Vocally, these include "scat" singing, using the falsetto, improvising vocal noises (be they animal, machine, or human), imitating an electric guitar, hiccups, tongue clicks, laughter, audible breathing, and long singing passages using different vowel sounds. Theatrically, these sections require the pianist to drum on the body of the instrument, beat their chest like a gorilla, flap their arms and hands like a bird's wings, and lower the head to the level of the keyboard as the piece ends (ex. 6a-6c).

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<sup>17</sup> Mad American Locomotive of the Heart 1, Look at the Sunflower, Mad American Locomotive of the Heart 2, All That Dress of Dust, Mad American Locomotive of the Heart 3, We're Not Our Skin of Grime, Mad American Locomotive of the Heart 4.

Add to this Kitzke's difficult traditional piano writing, and one sees that this music requires a pianist with a broad range of abilities.

**Ex. 6a: *Sunflower Sutra*, pp. 1. The piece begins with Kitzke's added text as the pianist drums on the top of the piano. In the third bar, the pianist begins a kind of "scat" singing.**

Allen Ginsberg (1955) **Sunflower Sutra** Jerome Kitzke (1999)

I. Mad American Locomotive of the Heart!  
W/SE AND CLEER

EXPRESSIVELY LIGHT AND PRECISE

voice

There is a sto-ry to tell.

$\text{♩} = \text{ca } 50$

$\text{♩} = \text{ca } 108$

$\text{♩} = \text{ca } 108$

piano

DRUM ON TOP OF PIANO ABOVE FINGERBOARD (SEE KEY)

mf

PEDAL-ALWAYS →

DO DA BADO BA DA BADO BA DA BADO BADE DO DOEDO WUP DO KA DOVEDO BADA DADO

SING-FALSETTO N.Y.

WOO

$\text{fzp}$

AD LIB.

$\text{mp}$  ti ti ti ti ti ti

RAISE HANDS SMOOTHLY UP

(m)

GRADUALLY HANDS BECOME VERY LIGHT, BARELY

ADD BREATHY SOUNDS AND SLIGHTLY WILD EXPRESSIONS  
LIKE FLUTTERING  
BIRDS

FLICKING KEYS, UNTIL THEY TAKE OFF *ppp*

PAINT LIKE  
A DOG  
0-FAST—TO—SLOW

The musical score is written on a grand staff with two treble clefs. It begins with a series of notes in the right hand, some marked with a 'p' (piano). The left hand has a few notes, including a 'b' (flat) and a 'p' (piano). The score includes various musical notations such as notes, rests, and dynamic markings. The tempo is marked '0-FAST—TO—SLOW'. The score is titled 'PAINT LIKE A DOG' and includes a section for 'FLICKING KEYS, UNTIL THEY TAKE OFF' marked 'ppp'. The score ends with a series of notes in the right hand, some marked with a 'p' (piano). The score is written in a style that is both musical and illustrative, with some notes and markings that suggest a specific sound or action. The score is written in a style that is both musical and illustrative, with some notes and markings that suggest a specific sound or action. The score is written in a style that is both musical and illustrative, with some notes and markings that suggest a specific sound or action.

Ex. 6c: *Sunflower Sutra*, pp. 49. The pianist, drumming on the lid while breathing in and out, slowly folds their head towards the keyboard as the “train” disappears in the distance.

SUNFLOWER SUTRA - 49

*BIG RIT.*

ti ti ti ti ti ti ti ti ti ti ti

QUIETLY-TAKE A BIG BREATH

WAIT.....

KNOCK, KNOCKING...

EX- IN- final breaths

*f* UNIFORM DIMINUENDO TO END

*p* DRUM ON TOP 2 *f* UNIFORM DIMINUENDO TO END

*pppp*

*pppp*

3 February 1999

New York City

mitakuye cyasin

\*\* — FEEL FREE TO ADD 7 - 10 MORE TRIPLETS IF THE DRAMA OF THE MOMENT ASKS FOR THEM

The remaining three sections are alternated with the “Mad Locomotive” sections and are named after lines from Ginsberg’s poem. It is in these sections that the pianist sings and recites the complete “Sunflower Sutra.” Kitzke generally trims down the accompanying aspects in order for the text to be more easily understood. There is often a simple chordal or two-line melodic accompaniment, which not only simplifies the reading of the text, but also allows the pianist to catch their breath after the intensity of each “locomotive” section. Still, there are many places in the piece where the accompanying piano part is very involved as the text is recited (ex. 7a-7b).

**Ex. 7a: *Sunflower Sutra*, pp. 11. The first presentation of Ginsberg’s poetry follows a brief introduction that is whistled in unison with the piano.**

The musical score for Ex. 7a is written for piano and includes the following lyrics and performance instructions:

I walked on the banks of the tincan banana dock and sat down under the huge shade of a Southern Pacific locomotive to look at the sunset over the box house hills and cry. oh Jack Kerouac sat beside me on a busted rusty iron pole, companion, we thought the same thoughts of the soul, bleak and blue and sad-eyed.

Performance instructions include: *SLIGHT*, *SEMPRE LEGATO*, *UNA CORDE*, *p*, *mp*, *f*, and *sf*.

Ex. 7b: *Sunflower Sutra*, pp. 29. The poem's text and the piano accompaniment grow hopeful with the discovery of the sunflower.

The musical score is written for piano and voice. It consists of three systems of staves. The piano part is in the upper staves, and the vocal part is in the lower staves. The key signature is one sharp (F#), and the time signature is 8/8. The tempo is marked 'moderato'.

**System 1:**

- Piano:** A perfect beauty of a sunflower! (Lyrics written above the staff)
- Vocal:** A perfect excellent (Lyrics written below the staff)

**System 2:**

- Piano:** lovely sunflower existence! (Lyrics written above the staff)
- Vocal:** a sweet natural eye to the new hip moon, (Lyrics written below the staff)

**System 3:**

- Piano:** woke up alive and excited (Lyrics written above the staff)
- Vocal:** grasping in the sun-set shadow sun-rise gold-en month-ly (Lyrics written below the staff)

**Performance Instructions:**

- Tempo:** moderato
- Tempo Change:** SLOWER (marked with a double bar line and 'SLOWER' below the staff, with a tempo change of 69% indicated)
- Tempo Change:** SLIGHT ACCEL (marked with a double bar line and 'SLIGHT ACCEL' below the staff, with a tempo change of 84% indicated)
- Section:** ATTACA (marked at the end of the score)

*Sunflower Sutra* is a major work requiring an immense level of focus and inhibition from its performers. Kitzke's constant merging of theatricality with intense pianistic fireworks makes the piece a moving experience both for the performer and the audience.

Another theatrical piece by Jerome Kitzke is *The Animist Child*. This short work for toy piano and speaking pianist tells the story of the Animist Child—a baby born who instinctively embraces the soul inherent in all things.<sup>18</sup> The vocal part consists entirely of pitched and non-pitched primal sounds. There are no actual words in the entire piece. Rather, Kitzke creates a language filled with energy and innocence, a bit resembling the sounds one associates with primitive human cultures. In addition to the vocal part, *The Animist Child* requires a number of theatrical techniques. Throughout the work, the pianist drums on the piano, claps, stomps, and uses facial expressions to convey the world of this omniscient child. Combined with the charm of the toy piano itself, Kitzke creates a landscape that parallels his own naturalistic and generally optimistic world view. While most pianists do not typically enter the realm of music for toy piano, *The Animist Child* is garnering a number of performances from many of the world's leading toy pianists including Margaret Len Tan, Wendy Mae Chambers, and Phyllis Chen. It is a joyful and lighthearted work that is ultimately beautiful in all its simplicity.

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<sup>18</sup> Jerome Kitzke, *The Animist Child*, New York: Peer Music Classical (1994), i.



Several other composers have made important contributions to the storytelling subset of theatrical piano music. Most notable among these is American composer Martin Bresnick whose 30-minute work *For the Sexes: The Gates of Paradise* rivals only Frederic Rzewski's *De Profundis* in scope and sheer pianistic complexity. Written for his wife Lisa Moore, a champion of contemporary music, *The Gates of Paradise* is based on a series of drawings and text by William Blake of the same name. These drawings and their texts depict "the life of man from birth to death."<sup>19</sup> While the work does not ask the pianist to contribute overt physical theatricalities, the vocal part is lengthy and complex. Pianistically, it is demanding and filled with a number of contemporary techniques from minimalism to extreme complexity. An additional element in the performance of the work is Bresnick's creation of a DVD projection that displays Blake's artwork in an animated form. This creates a multimedia experience that other composers have not attempted in this style. *The Gates of Paradise* is a monumental work and an important cornerstone to the repertoire of the theatrical pianist.

## **THE THEATER OF POLITICAL AND SOCIAL COMMENTARY | CHRISTIAN WOLFF AND FREDERIC RZEWSKI**

In the 1960s and 1970s, there existed a climate of political action and opposition. The anti-war movement and the Civil Rights Movement were gaining momentum and the causes of labor unions were often in the news. Rock and folk

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<sup>19</sup> Martin Bresnick, *For the Sexes: The Gates of Paradise*, New York: Carl Fischer (2001), 1.

musicians such as Bob Dylan and Pete Seeger made these causes the focus of much of their music. Classical musicians of the time also took notice. Among them, Frederic Rzewski and Christian Wolff were among the most vocal and most talented. The general commonality between these composers, which also includes Cornelius Cardew, is an association with the political ideals of Marxism and Maoism. Their political music, without exception, focuses on the plight of the poor, the overworked, the oppressed (both politically and sexually), and the unrepresented. While politically-driven musical statements are not exclusive to the twentieth century<sup>20</sup>, the use of vocal and theatrical techniques in solo piano music makes these statements more direct and understandable. After hearing these works, no speculation remains as to the composer's intentions or beliefs.

In 1971, Frederic Rzewski composed what has become the jumping-off point for the contemporary political expressions that follow. This work, *Coming Together/Attica*, was inspired by the bloody riots and ultimate suppression of them at Attica Correctional Facility in New York during the fall of 1971. Rzewski composed the piece after reading a powerful letter by Sam Melville, an inmate at Attica who was murdered during the uprising. *Coming Together* is written for an open instrumentation with narrator. The piece is a process work, wherein the opening melodic fragment is repeated and added to continually. Performers are left to

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<sup>20</sup> Beethoven may be the most famous example of a politically-driven composer. The Third Symphony, subtitled "Eroica," was originally dedicated to Napoleon. However, after he declared himself emperor, Beethoven famously scribbled out the dedication. Other examples of politically relevant composition can be found in the music of Chopin (Polonaises, "Revolutionary" Etude), Prokofiev (the "War" sonatas of the 1940s), Shostakovich (towing the Communist party line), and Schnittke (whose music highlights the plight of the people against the Soviet regime).

improvise as they wish, provided one instrument continues the driving melodic idea throughout.

The importance of *Coming Together* rests mostly in the direct and powerful assertion of its message that all people, no matter their station, deserve to be treated with dignity and respect. For the music world, it signaled a powerful new way to make political and social commentary through an artistic medium. Christian Wolff, a close collaborator with Rzewski, heard one of the early performances of *Coming Together*, and realized immediately how through music he could spread his political ideology.

#### CHRISTIAN WOLFF

Born in New York City, Christian Wolff (b. 1934) was a prodigy who by his teenage years was spending time with John Cage, Earl Brown, and the other musicians in the downtown scene. His political views were shaped during the 1960s and grew out of an anti-war, equal-rights-for-all belief. Through his friendships with ultra-left, ultra-political composers such as Cornelius Cardew and Frederic Rzewski, Wolff began incorporating their political axioms into his compositions, using texts drawn mostly from Maoist literature or American workers-union songs. His 1972 piano solo *Accompaniments* was his first venture into this style.

Inspired by Rzewski's *Coming Together*, Christian Wolff wrote *Accompaniments* for Frederic Rzewski (Rzewski is well-known as a virtuoso pianist). Wolff describes the piece in the liner notes for the first recording with Rzewski:

ACCOMPANIMENTS, for pianist who is also required to sing or chant and play percussion with his feet (drum with pedal and high hat), was written for Frederic Rzewski in...1972. This piece marks a break from what preceded, due partly to a growing impatience with what seemed to me the overly introverted feeling in much of my earlier music.... At the same time my interest in social and political questions had intensified and taken a more specific direction, and so I decided to attempt to make a more explicit connection between it and my music.

ACCOMPANIMENTS began that attempt, including a political text and using musical material of a more direct character. The text is from Jan Myrdal and Gun Kessle's book *China: The Revolution Continued*. It is part of an account of a veterinarian and a midwife, in their own words, of their experiences in a village in the area of Yenan during and after the Cultural Revolution. It was chosen both for its concreteness and for its illustration of the principle of applying a revolutionary political orientation to immediate and practical problems, indicating that these can only be understood and dealt with within such a political framework.

The music is in four parts. In the first, one chord or single note drawn out of a chord accompanies each syllable of the text. The text is sung feely (no pitches are specified), and the rhythm is free but tends to be shaped by the movement of the words of the text. The text is musically formalized by allowing optional repetitions of segments of it.... In the second and third parts, single line keyboard figures are intended to have a propulsive feeling and accompany feely combined percussion phrases (the drum and cymbals were practical in combination with keyboard and were partly suggested by their appearance in China during mass assemblies and marches). The addition of singing and percussion playing to the pianist's tasks is to extend one player's sound resources and to combine his professional competence with non-professional capacities – which we all have – in using one's voice and making percussive sounds. The fourth part of the piece requires only the use of the piano, and comes as something of a release.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Christian Wolff, *American Contemporary: Lines for String Quartet, Accompaniments for Piano*, liner notes, New York: Composers Recordings, Inc (1976), CRI SD 357.

As is evidenced by Wolff's notes, his use of text and percussion is used to more clearly articulate the programmatic implications of his composition. Following the composition of *Accompaniments*, most of Wolff's music dealt with political and social ideas in some way. Of his solo piano pieces, his work *Bread and Roses* (1976) utilizes text and theatrical aspects a great deal. *Bread and Roses* was written in honor of the Wobbly labor movement, a turn of the century union. It was a radical group that had a particular interest in song. *Bread and Roses* is excerpted from a larger, multi-movement work called *Wobbly Music*, for which Wolff used the Wobbly songs as texts.<sup>22</sup>

#### FREDERIC RZEWSKI

The standard-bearer for political composition, Frederic Rzewski (b. 1938) has written dozens of works (for ensemble and solo piano) in a theatrical style. As in his non-theatrical music, tremendous pianistic technique is required. While political motivations have fueled the majority of his important piano works (*The People United Will Never Be Defeated*, *The North American Ballads*), they are supremely important in his theater pieces.

Since the 1990s, even the most absolute of Rzewski's pieces involve some elements of theatrical interpretation. His 2006 composition *Nanosonatas, Book 1* consists of seven short, non-developed pieces using all aspects of serial compositional techniques. The abstraction of these pieces is broken only for a moment in the sixth

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<sup>22</sup> Jack Behrens, "Recent Piano Works of Christian Wolff (1972-1976)", *Studies in Music*, No. 2, 1977, 6.

movement when he incorporates a short excerpt of Biblical text from the book of Genesis.<sup>23</sup> The text refers to the story of Cain and Abel and is allegorical for the murderous affairs of mankind in the twenty-first century. Similarly, his monumental work *The Road* (1995-2003) incorporates a number of texts throughout its 10 hour journey. Rzewski has also composed a series of works using text from nursery rhymes for American pianist Sarah Cahill. The kind of “subtle” political reference found in the *Nanosonatas* is uncommon of Rzewski’s music in the last ten years, particularly since the 2003 invasion of Iraq. In the years following the start of the war, almost all of Rzewski’s music has used theater to oppose the fighting, and to, as the title of one of these works says, *Stop the War!*.

Rzewski’s most enduring work for the theatrical pianist is without question *De Profundis* (1992). Based on the prison letters of Oscar Wilde, *De Profundis* is a pianistic and theatrical tour-de-force providing no shortage of flashy virtuosity or dramatic action. Like *Sunflower Sutra*, *De Profundis* was written and premiered by American pianist Anthony de Mare whose theatrical training gave Rzewski an almost unlimited range of compositional possibilities. At nearly a half-hour in length, including eight sections of text, a fugue, and a virtuosic perpetual motion section, the work is a physical marathon for the performer. In Rzewski’s own words, *De Profundis* is a “melodramatic oratorio” inspired and dedicated to Luke Theodore from the Living Theater. The political subtext of *De Profundis* confronts the politics of

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<sup>23</sup> Genesis 4:10-11 ...*What have you done? The voice of the blood of your brother cries to me from the ground. You are cursed by the ground, that opened its mouth to drink the blood of your brother from your hand.*

sexuality, an aspect of Wilde's book that to Rzewski "seemed as lively now as it was a hundred years ago."<sup>24</sup> The book itself was written as a letter from Oscar Wilde to Lord Alfred Douglas while the author was imprisoned in Reading Gaol (jail) for immoral behavior. Wilde and Douglas were involved in a "profoundly neurotic homosexual affair."<sup>25</sup> While in prison, Wilde was forced into bankruptcy and found his creative spirit fade. For this, he rightly blamed Lord Alfred and penned *De Profundis* as a long letter describing his suffering, loss, and anger. Rzewski chose excerpts of text that give Wilde's insights into the meaning of the artistic life, the degradations of being a prisoner, and the injustice of government. For Rzewski and others at the turn of the twenty-first century, sexual politics and the ongoing battle for equal rights for homosexuals is among the most important topics.

Rzewski's *De Profundis* is written in eight sections with text, which are preceded by eight instrumental preludes. These preludes often incorporate vocal and theatrical techniques as well, but in a more dramatic fashion. Rzewski again comments in the opening notes that "the music demands a combination of virtuoso technique and a total lack of inhibition on stage, thus virtually guaranteeing that no mediocre or conventional performer will dare to go near it."<sup>26</sup> Vocally, the piece demands an incredible range of sounds. "Aspirated" breathing sounds, singing, grunts, beeps, horse sounds, the sounds of brass instruments, incredibly difficult whistling, humming, sighing, and laughing are all required at various moments. The

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<sup>24</sup> Frederic Rzewski, *De Profundis*, Brussels: Frederic Rzewski (1992), i.

<sup>25</sup> Oscar Wilde, *De Profundis*, Mineola, NY: Dover Publications (1996), iii.

<sup>26</sup> Rzewski, i.

recitation of Wilde's text alternates in character between introspective and whispered, declamatory and angry, pensive, sarcastic, and very matter-of-fact. It is never sung as in the Kitzke, but it is extremely rhythmic and closely accompanied using a kind of text painting not unlike what one finds in Schubert *lieder*. Theatrically, one section of *De Profundis* is a physically demanding dramatic accompaniment to Wilde's text. In this section, the pianist closes the keyboard cover and slaps, drums, knocks, and trills above and below the lid. Additionally, a long series of body slapping and the honking of a harpo horn accompany the almost hallucinatory nature of the text. Traditional pianism is not lost in *De Profundis* either. While the entire piece requires many displays of virtuosity, Rzewski includes a fiendishly difficult fugue and a schizophrenic perpetual-motion section requiring the pianist to perform a series of highly-articulated arpeggiations.

Throughout *De Profundis*, there are moments when the combinations of theater, vocal effects, and pianism come together in ways that truly heighten the storytelling nature of the work. To highlight these, I will look chronologically through the work at some of the most interesting and important moments in the work. The piece begins with a two-page instrumental prelude. From the first notes, one gains an immediate sense of exhaustion and curiosity. Arpeggiations on the keyboard are accompanied with an ever-intensifying series of inhalations and exhalations, leaving both audience and performer winded before the first introduction of text. As in the Kitzke, the text is often presented with a simple chordal accompaniment. That is the case for the first lines of text, "People point to Reading Gaol and say, 'That is where



the artistic life leads a man.”<sup>27</sup> This opening statement provides an important thematic element which returns at the work's conclusion.

The first section ends with the line “who can calculate the orbit of his own soul?”. What follows is a virtuosic prelude blending scampering keyboard writing with whistling, humming, nonsense sounds, and a whistled quote from *London Bridge is Falling Down*. These elements, as in most of the prelude sections, articulate aspects of the insanity that occurs when one is in prison. This is even more evident later in the piece.

The real story of Wilde's imprisonment begins in the 2<sup>nd</sup> section of text and is a duet between the piano part and the voice. The piano part is waltz of sorts, accompanying a matter of fact recounting of the day Wilde arrived at Reading. Filled with sadness and reality, the accompaniment moves through a chromatic progression of minor modes with interspersed places for the text to be recited over single chords only (ex. 8). This section concludes with one of the more poignant lines in the piece: “A day in prison on which one does not weep is a day on which one's heart is hard, not a day on which one's heart is happy.”<sup>28</sup>

The prelude that follows is a somber blending of sobs and sighs, which climaxes in a scampering outburst of laughter, playing on the neurosis of prison life. Rzewski again calls on the pianist to sing, hum, and use audible breathing simultaneously with the piano part. The following section of text is among the most desperate in the work. It describes Wilde's view of the inability of morality, justice, and religion to help him

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<sup>27</sup> Rzewski, 3.

<sup>28</sup> Rzewski, 11.

through his present state. Rzewski again uses very descriptive accompanying elements to paint this text with a sound that reaches beyond the words on the page. The final conclusion of this section is Wilde's realization that surviving his imprisonment means transforming all that has happened to him into something bigger. Rzewski, using a beautiful alberti-like accompanying figure that rises up the piano, sets the text "there is not a single degradation of the body which I must not try and make into a spiritualizing of the soul" (ex. 9)

**Ex. 8: *De Profundis*, pp. 11.**

- 11 -

FOR HALF AN HOUR I STOOD THERE IN THE GREY NOVEMBER RAIN SURROUNDED BY A JEERING MOB.

FOR A YEAR I WEPT EVERY DAY AT THE SAME HOUR AND FOR THE SAME SPACE OF TIME, IN PRISON

TEARS ARE A PART OF EVERY DAY'S EXPERIENCE. A DAY IN PRISON ON WHICH ONE DOES NOT WEEP

IS A DAY ON WHICH ONE'S HEART IS HARD, NOT A DAY ON WHICH ONE'S HEART IS HAPPY.

Ex. 9: *De Profundis*, pp. 17-18.

Handwritten musical score for the first system. The vocal line (top staff) contains the lyrics "THERE IS NOT A SINGLE" and "DEGRADATION". The piano accompaniment (bottom staff) features a triplet of eighth notes marked "3" and "4. pp". Pedal markings are present below the piano staff, including a wavy line and a sharp sign.

Handwritten musical score for the second system. The vocal line includes the lyrics "OF THE BODY WHICH I MUST NOT TRY AND MAKE INTO A SPIRITUALISING". The piano accompaniment shows a crescendo ("cresc.") and a piano ("pp") dynamic. Pedal markings include a wavy line and a sharp sign.

Handwritten musical score for the third system. The vocal line includes the lyrics "OF THE SOUL". The piano accompaniment features a piano ("pp") dynamic and a tempo change to "marcato" with a tempo of 112. A circled "T" is marked. A note indicates a tempo of 120. A star symbol is used below the piano staff.

[VOICE: IN THIS SECTION THE PIANIST MAY UTTER AN OCCASIONAL GRUNT, PUFF, OR WHEELE TO GIVE EMPHASIS TO A PARTICULAR NOTE, AS CLASSICAL PERFORMERS FREQUENTLY DO, APPARENTLY WITHOUT BEING AWARE OF IT.]

\* (little or no pedal)

The prelude that follows continues this idea in full. Rzewski uses a fugue to convey this spiritualization. One senses in the simplicity of the fugal theme the enlightenment of Wilde's spirit and at once thinks back to Bach. As the fugue develops, torment and irony abound, and the fugue ends with a laugh and a sarcastic, almost humorous transition to the reality of the next textual setting in which we note that "things are what they are and will be what they will be."<sup>29</sup> Rzewski continues, using Wilde's text, which describes the slow, almost non-existent passage of time, and the perpetual sense of "twilight" both in the prison and in the heart.

In a dramatic and ironic twist, after describing motion as "no more," Rzewski begins the next prelude which is a virtuoso, etude-like, five-page perpetual motion series of arpeggiations and staccato alternations of incredible difficulty (ex. 10). Theatrically, Rzewski notes in the score that "the pianist may accompany him/herself ad lib., singing along with the music every so often, as if one were practicing at home alone: use the syllables 'didldidldidl...'.<sup>30</sup>

Rzewski takes a more subtle approach to both the text and the prelude that follows, accompanying Wilde's words with a series of single notes spread around the piano and played almost independently of each other. The prelude is a "song without words" using rich sonorities to accompany a series of "ah's" which start as sighs and become even more melancholy when sung a few bars later.

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<sup>29</sup> Rzewski, 23-24.

<sup>30</sup> Rzewski, 27.

Ex. 10: *De Profundis*, pp. 27

-27-

VOICE: IN THIS SECTION THE PIANIST MAY ACCOMPANY HIM/HERSELF AD LIB. SINGING ALONG WITH THE MUSIC EVERY SO OFTEN, AS IF ONE WERE PRACTICING AT HOME ALONE; USE THE SYLLABLES "DIDLIDLIDL..."

3 ppp  
4  
8  
(sempre una corda Ped. ad lib)

(in little by little increasingly variable intensity)

The text that comes next describes the hallucinatory, psychotic, and desperate anger that Wilde felt while in prison. Directed plainly at Lord Alfred, Wilde says:

The memory of our friendship is the shadow that walks with me here: that seems never to leave me: that wakes me up at night to tell the same story over and over: at dawn it begins again: it follows me into the prison yard and makes me talk to myself as I tramp round: each detail that accompanied each dreadful moment I am forced to recall: there is nothing that happened in those ill-starred years that I cannot recreate in that chamber of the brain which is set apart for grief or for despair: every strained note of your voice, every twitch and gesture of your nervous hands, every bitter word, every poisonous phrase comes back to me: I remember the street or river down which we passed: the wall or woodland that surrounded us, at what figure on the dial stood the hands of the clock, which way went the wings of the wind, the shape and colour of the moon.<sup>31</sup>

Rzewski captures the desperation of this passage through an ingenious use of percussive and theatrical techniques. First, the text is whispered, giving the sense that the narrator does not want anyone to hear or is afraid of what is all around him. Second, the pianist closes the lid of the keyboard and begins drumming, trilling, and slapping on all parts of the instrument. Third, the rhythm of the speech is broken and becomes almost syncopated as though the narrator is out of breath or tremendously afraid. The accompaniment moves from the keyboard lid to the actual pianist's body in a series of slaps and scratches on the arms, chest, face, and head. What follows is almost like a hallucination wherein the pianist knocks and taps on the piano while barking like a dog, clucking like a chicken, squawking and exclaiming a series of hard consonant sounds. The pianist then reaches for a harpo horn, which is honked as accompaniment to a tuba-like part and the recitation of the text "there is such a thing

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<sup>31</sup> Rzewski, iii.

as leaving mankind alone; there is no such thing as governing mankind. All forms of government are failures.”<sup>32</sup> The madness concludes with a second outburst of self-brutalization by the pianist and several exclamations before devolving back into Wilde’s text (ex. 11). This section is the theatrical climax of *De Profundis* and for the remainder of the piece, Rzewski sets to resolve many of the issues brought up previously.

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<sup>32</sup> Rzewski, 41.

Ex. 11: *De Profundis*, pp. 37-42.

[whispered]

THE MEMORY OF OUR FRIENDSHIP IS THE SHADOW THAT WALKS WITH ME: THAT REPS NEVER TO LEAVE ME

[Drum with fingers on closed keyboard lid]

R.H.



I REMEMBER THE STREET OR RIVER DOWN WHICH WE PASSED:

3  
4 (Rub, or stroke, different parts of the instrument) [speak]

R.H. d. (scratch under keyboard)

L.H. [hard surface] [soft surface]

THE WALL OR WOODLAND THAT SURROUNDED US,

[Scratch under keyboard]

R.H. p. [center → left] [center → right]

L.H. p. [right + left → center]

AT WHAT FIGURE ON THE DIAL STOOD THE HANDS OF THE CLOCK, WHICH WAY WENT THE WIND.

4  
4 (T) [Snap fingers]

R.H. p. z p z p z p z p z p z

L.H. p. z p z p z p z p z p z

OF THE WIND THE SHAPE AND COLOUR OF THE MOON.

5  
4 (T)

R.H. p. z p z p z p z p z p z

L.H. p. z p z p z p z p z p z

MOMENT I AM FORCED TO RECALL: THERE IS NOTHING THAT HAPPENED IN THOSE ILL-STARRED YEARS

① 5  
4 fingernail

R.H. p. z p z p z p z p z p z

L.H. p. z p z p z p z p z p z

THAT I CANNOT RECREATE IN THAT CHAMBER OF THE BRAIN WHICH IS SET APART FOR BRIEF OR

3  
4 [slap left forearm] [slap face] [head]

R.H. p. z p z p z p z p z p z

L.H. p. z p z p z p z p z p z

[slap right upper arm]

FOR DESPAIR: EVERY STRAINED NOTE OF YOUR VOICE, EVERY TWITCH AND GESTURE OF YOUR

4  
4 [arms] [chest] [Scratch head] [rub hands]

R.H. p. z p z p z p z p z p z

L.H. p. z p z p z p z p z p z

[Scratch face]

NERVOUS HANDS, EVERY BITTER WORD, EVERY ANIMATED PHRASE COMES BACK TO ME:

5  
4 [Rub breast] [legs] [arms]

R.H. p. z p z p z p z p z p z

L.H. p. z p z p z p z p z p z

(normal voice) -40-

High Low

BU KA MU KA KA KA LU KA MU KA BU KA TU KA KA PI PI KA KA KA SUTU KA PO KA PO KA KO KA KLO KA

3 4 [Knock on wood]

R.H. L.H.

[slap fingers]

(High) [like a dog]

RU WOOF WOOF WOOF WOOF

7 4 [slap on wood with flesh of finger]

R.H. L.H.

[tap on closed lid]

[like a chicken]

KA KAKA KAKAKA KAKAKA UMFRANKA KAKAKAKAM WOOF SQUAWK

[with fingernails]

R.H. L.H.

[Like a tuba] (♩ = ♩) ♩ = 120

BA BA BA BA BA BA BA BA BA BA BA BA BA BA BA BA CH CH

4 3 9 16 ①

[Harpo horn]

R.H. L.H.

(♩ = 60) [in an old, wise voice] -41-

THERE IS SUCH A THING AS LEAVING MANKIND ALONE; THERE IS NO SUCH THING AS

3 5 4

[Harpo horn]

R.H. L.H.

[tap] [slap keyboard lid]

(High) (Low)

GOVERNING MANKIND. ALL FORAS OF GOVERNMENT ARE FAILURES.

4 3 3 5 4

R.H. L.H.

[like a tuba]

BA BA BA BA BA BA BA BA BA BA BA BA BA BA BA BA CH CH

4 4

R.H. L.H.

BDL D L DL DM BBA BA BA BA CH CH

① 3 4

R.H. L.H.

- 42 -      [♩ = 120]

5 4 [slap: chest] [highs] 10 8 [cheeks] 4 4 [head]

R.H. L.H.

[sides] [ass] [cheeks] [stomp]

[♩ = 96]

3 4 [slap head] [face] [chest] [thighs]

BUM BUM BUM BUM

[ass] [stomp] [slap under keyboard] [open lid] [clap hands]

THE

Pianistically the final two sections of text and the last prelude are similar, using simple chordal accompaniments. The text is recited with a sense of calm, acceptance, and hope. The final prelude is a soft, slow duet between the piano part and a whistled vocal line. Made difficult by a number of interval clashes (Rzewski often places the whistling part in opposition to the piano by tritones, sevenths, or ninths), it is a beautiful, almost sentimental recounting of the journey. Rzewski, as if

closing the circle of time, revisits the opening text, as Wilde hopes for where the “artistic life” truly leads a man. The final hopeful pronouncement makes one believe that even in the most desperate of situations, life is not over, as the pianist reflects and says “what a beginning, what a wonderful beginning.”<sup>33</sup> This thought lingers with the final chord and concludes one of the most complete dramatic experiences outside the opera house.

Rzewski’s *De Profundis* has already attained a reputation as a masterpiece. The style of the piece, and of Rzewski’s other theatrical compositions, is often copied, but never duplicated. Composers from all corners of the world are beginning to use many of the theatrical concepts first developed by Rzewski. Canadian composer Rodney Sharmon has written a work based on sexual exploration (*The Garden*), which has received great praise. However, while composers like Rzewski, Kitzke, and Martin Bresnick work to innovate and broaden the landscape of theatrical music, most attempts are little more than “look alikes.”

## TO THE THEATRICAL PIANISTS

The theatrical genre would have been an impossibility if not for a select group of pianists with the desire and capability to perform these works with conviction, dedication, and absolute love. Among these pianists the leaders have been David Tudor, Frederic Rzewski, Margaret Len Tan, Anthony de Mare, and Lisa Moore.

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<sup>33</sup> Rzewski, 49.

Without these pianists, and a new generation who are learning from them, much of this music would not exist. While composers in the twenty-first century are performing their own music more and more (Rzewski, Kitzke, Monk), it is through the work of professional pianists that much of this music will find its life and its audience. It is to them that this paper is in honor of, and to the hope that as theatrical music receives more frequent performances around the world, it becomes part of every pianist's vocabulary.

## APPENDIX A

### TEXT OF JEROME KITZKE'S *SUNFLOWER SUTRA*<sup>34</sup>

*There is a story to tell.*

*The story itself is the name.*

*Hey, Jack. What's that pullin' in? The S.P. 1249?*<sup>35</sup>

*Ah blessed be, it is the 12 forty nine.*

I walked on the banks of the tincan banana dock and sat down  
under the huge shade of a Southern Pacific locomotive  
to look at the sunset over the box house hills and cry.  
Jack Kerouac sat beside me on a busted rusty iron pole,  
companion, we thought the same thoughts of the soul,  
bleak and blue and sad-eyed, surrounded by the gnarled  
steel roots of trees of machinery.

The oily water on the river mirrored the red sky, sun sank on  
top of final Frisco peaks, no fish in that stream, no hermit in  
those mounts, just ourselves, rheumy-eyed and hungover like  
old bums on the riverbank, tired and wily.

Look at the sunflower, he said, there was a dead gray shadow  
against the sky, big as a man, sitting dry on top of a pile  
of ancient sawdust—

—I rushed up enchanted—it was my first sunflower, memories of  
Blake—my visions—Harlem

and Hells of the Eastern rivers, bridges clanking Joe's Greasy  
Sandwiches, dead baby carriages, black treadless tires  
forgotten and unretreaded, the poem of the riverbank,  
condoms & pots, steal knives, nothing stainless, only  
the dank muck and the razor-sharp artifacts passing into  
the past—

and the gray Sunflower poised against the sunset, crackly bleak  
and dusty with the smut and smog and smoke of olden  
locomotives in its eye—

corolla of bleary spikes pushed down and broken like a  
battered crown, seeds fallen out of its face, soon-to-be-  
toothless mouth of sunny air, sunrays obliterated on its  
hairy head like a dried wire spiderweb,

leaves stuck out like arms out of the stem, gestures from the  
sawdust root, broke pieces of plaster fallen out of the  
black twigs, a dead fly in its ear,

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<sup>34</sup> Kitzke's added text is in italics.

<sup>35</sup> The *Southern Pacific 1249* is the personification of Kitzke's sister, Mary, whose birthday was in December of 1949.

Unholy battered old thing you were, my sunflower O my soul I  
loved you then!

The grime was no man's grime but death and human  
locomotives,

all that dress of dust, that veil of darkened railroad skin,  
that smog of cheek, that eyelid of black mis'ry, that  
sooty hand or phallus or protuberance of artificial  
worse-than-dirt-industrial-modern-all that civilization  
spotting your crazy golden crown—  
and those blear thoughts of death and dusty loveless eyes and  
ends with withered roots below, in the home-pile of  
sand and sawdust, rubber dollar bills, skin of  
machinery, the guts and the innards of the weeping  
coughing car, the empty lonely tincans with their rusty  
tongues alack, what more could I name, the smoked  
ashes of some cock cigar, the cunts of wheelbarrows  
and the milky breasts of cars, wornout asses out of  
chairs and sphincters of dynamos—all these  
entangled in your mummied roots—and you there  
standing before me in the sunset, all your glory in your  
form!

A perfect beauty of a sunflower! a perfect excellent lovely  
sunflower existence! a sweet natural eye to the new hip  
moon, woke up alive and excited grasping in the sunset  
shadow sunrise golden monthly breeze!

How many flies buzzed round you innocent of your grime,  
while you cursed the heavens of the railroad and your  
flower soul?

Poor dead flower? when did you forget you were a flower?  
when did you look at your skin and decide you were  
an impotent dirty old locomotive? the ghost of a  
locomotive? the spector and shade of a once powerful  
mad American locomotive?

You were never no locomotive, Sunflower, you were a  
sunflower!

And you locomotive, you are a locomotive, forget me not!  
So I grabbed up the skeleton thick sunflower and stuck it at my  
side like a scepter,

and deliver my sermon to my soul, and Jack's soul too, and  
anyone who'll listen,

—We're not our skin of grime, we're not our dread bleak dusty  
imageless locomotive, we're all beautiful golden  
sunflowers inside, we're blessed by our own seed &  
golden hairy naked accomplishment-bodies growing

into mad black formal sunflowers in the sunset, spied  
on by our eyes under the shadow of the mad locomotive  
riverbank sunset Frisco hilly tincan evening sit-down  
vision.

*So Jack, there she goes—isn't she beautiful? the S.P. 1239,  
going, maybe forever, but never, gone.*<sup>36 37</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Jerome Kitzke, *Sunflower Sutra*, New York: Peermusic Classical (1999).

<sup>37</sup> Allen Ginsberg, "Sunflower Sutra", in *Howl and Other Poems*, San Francisco: City Lights Press (1959), 35-38.



# APPENDIX B

## THEATRICAL MAP FOR JEROME KITZKE'S *SUNFLOWER SUTRA*

### SECTION 1: MAD AMERICAN LOCOMOTIVE OF THE HEART 1 (PP. 1-10)

#### THEATRICAL/VOCAL TECHNIQUES

- spoken text (Kitzke's addition)
- "scat" singing (ba-da-be-ba-wup...)
- falsetto singing
- raising and lowering of hands in the air
- audible inhalation/exhalation
- hiccup
- "finger-in-cheek mouth pop"
- "drunk" laughter
- non-pitched "oon-cha oon-cha" w/accents
- ad lib vocals
- imitation of electric guitar "wah-wah" (at specific pitches)
- wind sound
- sing glissando "ooh" to "ah"
- hiccup (drunk)

#### THEATRICAL/PIANISTIC ACCOMPANIMENT

*drumming on body of piano*  
*drumming on piano*  
 unison piano note and *drumming*  
 n/a  
 quote "Where have all the flowers gone?"  
 n/a  
 n/a  
 n/a  
 traditional piano notation, octaves /accents  
 virtuosic alternate hands passagework  
 traditional piano notation  
  
 traditional piano notation  
*fast roll on chest*  
 n/a

### SECTION 2: LOOK AT THE SUNFLOWER (PP. 10-18)

#### THEATRICAL/VOCAL TECHNIQUES

- whistling
- recitation of Ginsberg's text
- falsetto slide
- "awe-struck" inhalation
- singing of Ginsberg's text

#### THEATRICAL/PIANISTIC ACCOMPANIMENT

unison accompaniment of whistling /  
 traditional bass line accompaniment  
 traditional piano notation  
 " " "  
 " " "  
 " " "

### SECTION 3: MAD AMERICAN LOCOMOTIVE OF THE HEART 2 (PP. 18-23)

#### THEATRICAL/VOCAL TECHNIQUES

- HA HA HA... / scat singing
- breathy sounds / crazed expressions
- "pant like a dog"
- di-di-di-di scat singing
- guttural exclamation of "ho"
- exclaim "na na na na"

#### THEATRICAL/PIANISTIC ACCOMPANIMENT

raucous, mixed-meter accompaniment, cluster  
 chords played with whole hand  
*flick keys to extreme end of piano and flutter*  
*arms and hands like a bird*  
 single chord  
 unison melodic line with singing  
*ff* bass notes  
 repeated cluster chords in unison with voice

### SECTION 4: ALL THAT DRESS OF DUST (PP. 23-29)

#### THEATRICAL/VOCAL TECHNIQUES

- n/a
- return to poem's text
- "wacky" reading of text "rubber dollar bills, [AAK/] skin of machinery..."
- singing
- exclamation of the sunflower

#### THEATRICAL/PIANISTIC ACCOMPANIMENT

tender melody with counterpoint  
 chordal accompaniment  
 swinging triplet accompaniment between hands  
  
 unison with singing  
*fff* chords and tremolo

## SECTION 5: MAD AMERICAN LOCOMOTIVE OF THE HEART 3 (PP. 30-34)

### THEATRICAL/VOCAL TECHNIQUES

- n/a
- foot stomp, yell “Hey!”
- Indian-like singing of the word “who”

### THEATRICAL/PIANISTIC ACCOMPANIMENT

“wild–intense” dynamic, accelerating repeated notes and chords  
 “ “ “ “ “  
 harmonic fifths in base, intense broken triplets accompanying

## SECTION 6: WE’RE NOT OUT SKIN OF GRIME (PP. 35-41)

### THEATRICAL/VOCAL TECHNIQUES

- return to poem’s text “How many flies buzzed round you...”
- text continues, “and deliver my sermon...” jazz accompaniment marked “be like double bass”
- text continues, “We’re not our skin of grime...” (*marked in the score as “The Point”*) simple, chordal accompaniment
- poem concluded, “spied on by our eyes...” return to drumming on body of piano

### THEATRICAL/PIANISTIC ACCOMPANIMENT

“fast, buzzing” trill-like figure / traditional piano playing

## SECTION 7: MAD AMERICAN LOCOMOTIVE OF THE HEART 4 (PP. 41-49)

### THEATRICAL/VOCAL TECHNIQUES

- n/a
- recitation of the remainder of Kitzke’s added text, “So Jack, there she goes– isn’t she beautiful? the S.P. 1249...”
- long section of singing on “ooh” (*marked in the score as “Canticle of Mary”*)
- ad lib vocal sound “be they human, animal or machine” (*marked in the score as She takes the final train*)
- exclaim “choo-choo”
- tongue clicks (high and low), “tss” sound, whispering “cha” sound from *f* to *pppp*
- *f* “ti” sound with “big ritardando”
- take a big breath
- exhale and inhale in rhythm, *dimuendo*

### THEATRICAL/PIANISTIC ACCOMPANIMENT

G Major seventh sonority, rapid tremolos, repeated *f*’s lead into melodic restatement of the opening  
 repeated high *f*’s  
 accompanied by rapid tremolos  
 accompanied by an accelerating development of repeated clusters, ending with a C Major chord  
 right hand plays on keys, left hand drums on piano  
 “ “ “ “ “ “  
 right hand plays chromatic scale, left hand knocks with knuckles on piano body  
 C Major chord  
 both hands drum triplet patter on piano until silent to end (“begin in erect exaltation, then gradually constrict inward until head is at keyboard for final notes”)

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